



## NEWSLETTER

#1 2001

# Victuals

Most of us tend to believe that our ancestors' lives were harsh and prosaic, and that their daily routines were fueled by unimaginative and equally dull meals. They had no supermarkets to shop in to buy deli-cut steaks or frozen oriental-style vegetables; of course their lives must have been very rough indeed! They must have dreaded going to the table!

The fact of the matter is that our ancestors might have enjoyed their mealtimes every bit as much as we do today. Research into the culinary habits of our colonial ancestors reveals that they did quite well with what they had at their disposal. This essay will explore some of the mealtime habits of our Eighteenth Century Patriot ancestors.

The one major obstacle that our ancestors met with in terms of food was the problem of keeping perishable items from spoiling before they could be used. What would be the remedy for this problem? First, we must remember that, unlike the factory and office life that we are used to in this day and age, the majority of our ancestors' primary occupation was farming. Now when we speak of farming, we are not speaking of the specialized farming which today's farmers engage in. A farmer did not raise only beef cattle or only dairy cattle, nor did he plant only corn or only potatoes. A farmer spread his efforts over the whole range of possible forms of produce. Along with raising cattle, sheep and poultry, a farmer would plant

vegetables for his table besides the grains to be made into bread and to fatten the livestock. A look at many deeds from the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries show that an apple orchard was a valuable bargaining tool when it came to selling property. The orchard provided not only fruit for eating, but that rather unperishable commodity called cider. Spices and herbs were grown so that the basic food could be flavored, and so that sicknesses could be prevented (or at least lessened in severity). In other words, the farmer grew a wide variety of plants and raised a variety of livestock so that there would always be food available and so that his family would get a somewhat balanced diet.

A second thing we must look at in regard to our ancestors' culinary habits is the general lack of refrigeration they had to live with and circumvent. The first thing that might come to mind is the custom of smoking meats in order to preserve them, but that was only one way in which they could preserve their food (and, of course, smoking could not be used for all types of foods). Another method was the construction of a spring-house. All you need to do is dip your hand down into the water that comes directly out of the ground to realise that it is pretty cold. Average temperatures of the underground water in this south-central Pennsylvania region is between 50 and 55 degrees. That might not be cold enough to freeze meat, but

it provided the necessary coldness to keep milk fresh for more than a day. It would also keep butter in somewhat of a solid state. Until just a few decades ago, the spring-house was a standard structure to be found on a farmstead. Our ancestors found that another way to keep food from spoiling was to insulate foods such as fruit with sawdust or ground and lock in that food's inherent freshness by shutting out the heat and insects that would accelerate decay. The fruit cellar has all but vanished from most of our basements, but our ancestors knew that apples buried in the dry dirt of the cellar would be as ripe in February as the day they were buried there the previous October.

With the obstacles out of the way, we can look at the actual menu that our ancestors chose from. There was not much difference between what rural folk ate and what their town cousins ate, because even in the towns each homeowner raised most of his family's own food. In many towns a portion of the land was set aside as a communal pasture for the town-dwellers' livestock. Usually the purpose of the main town square was to provide grass to pasture the animals; it wasn't there for the purpose of looking pretty. The tales we read which speak about animals running loose in the streets of colonial towns are not speaking about animals which have gotten loose from their confining fences or leashes. Rather those tales speak of the general custom of the townspeople letting their livestock feed wherever they could. It is, at first, surprising to read an estate inventory belonging to a town-dweller and to find the same kind and number of livestock listed as for a country-dweller. An example of this can be found in our own backyard, in the estate inventory of Johan Simon Clar. Mr. Clar came to reside in the town of Bedford after serving as a Captain in the York County Militia, and it was here he was residing when he died in the year 1812. His home was in the original log building which had served as the first Bedford County Court House and Jail; it sat right on the northeast corner of the public square. Johan Simon Clar's inventory included five sheep; one sow, seven pigs and three large shoats; one cow and three horses. There is no doubt that these livestock grazed on the grounds in the immediate vicinity of

the Clar home - and just across the street from the new Court house.

Breakfast for our colonial ancestors included oatmeal or a cornmeal mush (which means oat or corn meal boiled in water). The German families added small beer or cider, instead of water, to the flour or cornmeal. Usually a meat was served. In the frontier regions such as Bedford County, the meat of choice might have been a wild game, including venison or bear steak. Cold roasts, mutton chops, ham or veal cutlets were variations if available. Sausages and scrapple that we eat today for breakfast are descendants of the breakfast meats that our ancestors ate to get their energy built up for the day's toil. They also varied their morning meal by eating a hash made of some sort of poultry and potatoes fried together. Eggs were usually boiled. Buckwheat or cornmeal cakes sopped up the grease from the other foods. In the Scottish households, these buckwheat cakes were known as "buckwheat souens". Fruit was seldom eaten for breakfast. The Germans enjoyed a type of doughnut dipped in molasses. Two cups of cornmeal mixed with 3/4 teaspoon of salt and two tablespoonfulls of butter and enough water to form a semi-stiff paste would be shaped into elongated oval forms that resembled ears of corn. These would be placed on a greased shovel and rested over glowing coals for about twenty minutes to harden into a type of corn pone called hoecakes. To wash it all down a glass of cider or tea did the trick. A number of substitutes for actual tea could easily be found in the woods nearby. These tea substitutes, called tisanes, included red clover, sassafras, sage, pennyroyal and catnip (among others too numerous to mention). Coffee might be drunk, but not always at breakfast time; it would usually be reserved for the midday meal.

The midday meal was served between 2 and 4 o'clock. It consisted of soup, a roast beef or ham or mutton along with chicken or turkey at the same table. Fish was enjoyed if the family lived near a stream. Wild game always found a spot on the table in the company of the other meats. Salad greens would be cooked with beef or pork, especially by German families, who developed cabbage into sauerkraut to take the place of other salad greens such as dandelion, endive and kale. Jams,

jellies and sweetmeats added additional flavors and texture to the meal. Indian pudding, bread pudding and plum pudding were popular, as were pies of whatever sort of fruit the housewife had on hand. Vegetables were mostly blanched and in the mid-1700s they began to be eaten for their own flavors, rather than simply as garnishes for the meat dishes. Cheeses rounded out the midday fare. Coffee was served to adults during this meal; the children drank cider. The midday meal was the largest of the day, and was expected to tide you over till about 9 or 10 o'clock in the evening.

A simple meal was served late in the evening, after the day's work was completed and night's darkness had descended. Supper for our colonial ancestors would have consisted primarily of either a cold meat or fish along with eggs (usually scrambled for this meal) and bread, butter and cheese. Fruit and a light dessert, such as cheesecake or jumbals (a cookie flavored with almonds) rounded out the meal. Wine or cider was drunk with the supper. German suppers might consist only of sausage, sauerkraut and cheese and possibly schnitz-knopf (small dumplings cooked with dried apples). The light evening meal was essential to be able to get a good night's rest, so that you'd be ready for the next day's labor.

The diet of our Eighteenth Century ancestors varied slightly from season to season, because of the seasonal availability of certain food items. As mentioned previously, fruits and vegetables could be stored for a period of time in the root cellars, but by the end of the winter period, the quantities of those stored items might be running low. The spring time would see less fruit and vegetables being eaten because of the available stored supply being low, and the next season's crop not yet growing. But the late winter and spring might find more fresh game on the table, due to the easier tracking and shooting of rabbits, turkeys, opossum and the like in the snow covered forests. Fresh maple sugar and honey would sweeten the palates in the fall and winter. Nuts, eaten raw or roasted, would become available in the fall. The first crop of corn, harvested in the late summer, would herald a season of corn and cornmeal dishes, including hominy. The winter's

thaw found the streams teeming with fish, and crayfish.

Special occasions called for special treats. Despite what most people might think, some of the treats we enjoy today in our modern times were also enjoyed throughout the Eighteenth Century. In 1744 a group of Virginian commissioners were enroute to negotiate a treaty with the Iroquois nation. They stopped at the home of Governor Thomas Bladen in Annapolis, Maryland where they were treated to "*some fine Ice Cream*". A recipe book published in 1769 by Elizabeth Whitaker Raffald instructed the housewife to peel, stone and purée, twelve ripe apricots; then to add to that six ounces of sugar and one pint scalding cream. This mixture would then be placed in a tin or pewter container, which in turn was placed inside a tub of ice and salt. Some early cooks instructed the ice cream to be stirred as it hardened, while others felt that process was unnecessary.

Christmas celebrations called for a bowl of wassail, basically a spiced ale, to be passed around. As everyone took a drink, they would give a toast to the well being of those present. *Wass Hael* means "be whole" or "be well". Fruit cakes and puddings were favorites for the Christmas season. Ginger was used to flavor cakes and cookies, while brandy flavored fruits such as peaches and pears. A treat for the children was sugared (or crystallized) flower tops made from rose, violets, marigolds, borage and rosemary.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that, although the environment may have influenced the diet of our colonial ancestors (*e.g.* the eating of wild game which might not have been available in Europe), the culinary customs which they brought with them from the Old World would have survived to flourish in this land. The Germans, as noted above, were fond of their sausage and sauerkraut. In this new land, the sausage might have been based on venison rather than pork, but it was still sausage nonetheless. The land itself was excellent for farming and raising cabbage and other leafy vegetables. The Irish, basing a majority of their dishes around lamb meat, would have continued the custom in this land just as they had in their homeland, the Emerald Isle. Sheep were as common in the New World as in the Old. Spices

might have been a bit more difficult to come by, but the pioneers in this land were inventive, and small obstacles could be overcome. The Scottish settlers, with their preference for fish, sea and land fowl would likewise have found their life in America no different than it had been in their homeland, for the streams were full of a variety of fish. Welsh dishes based on beef and dairy products were made possible with the excellent grains that their cattle could feed on in this unspoiled land. The one ingredient which our colonial ancestors found in great abundance here in America was *variety*. Indeed, the spice of life for our ancestors was the variety they encountered by suddenly becoming neighbors with families of so many other nationalities. While living in their Old World homelands, few families would have made a conscious effort to investigate and learn the culinary arts of their neighboring countries. There would have been little impetus other than idle curiosity to do so, and that may truly be why certain recipes stayed linked to particular ethnic groups. In

America, on the other hand, a (previously) German family would find itself living right beside a (previously) Scottish family. The housewives were bound to share their recipes over time. We can see that our Patriot ancestors certainly were no worse off than we are (with our processed cheese and flavorless bread) when it came to mealtimes.

Now, to discuss the eating customs and habits of the Patriot soldiers in particular, it should first be mentioned that what the Continental Congress and the various provincial assemblies intended for the common soldier, and what was, in reality, the case, were not always the same thing.

While the Continental Army was still in its formative stages during the siege of the British who were holding the city of Boston, the Continental Congress passed a resolution determining the rations that should be distributed. The following was included in a group of resolutions which formed the basis of the *Rules And Regulations For The Continental Army*, approved in November, 1775:

1. 1 lb. of beef, or 3/4 lb. Pork, or 1 lb. salt fish, per day.
2. 1 lb. of bread or flour per day.
3. 3 pints of pease, or beans per week, or vegetables equivalent, at one dollar per bushel for pease or beans.
4. 1 pint of milk per man per day, or at the rate of 1/72 of a dollar.
5. 1 half pint of Rice, or 1 pint of indian meal per man per week.
6. 1 quart of spruce beer or cyder per man per day, or nine gallons of Molasses per company of 100 men per week.
7. 3 lb. Candles to 100 Men per week for guards.
8. 24 lb. of soft or 8 lb. of hard soap for 100 men per week.

A couple years later, during the winter of 1777-78, while the army was encamped at Valley

Forge, the proscribed rations were supposed to include:

1. One and one half pound of flour or bread,
2. One pound of beef or fish.
3. Three quarters pound of pork
4. One gill of whiskey or spirits.

Of course, the rations, in their proposed amounts, did not always materialize. The farmers

in the vicinity of Philadelphia tended to sell their produce to the British, because it was they who

had the money to pay for the produce; the colonial government, the Continental Congress, could pass all the resolutions it wanted to, but it did not have the currency to compensate the farmers. For that reason, the farmers sold their produce to the British, who spent the winter at ease in their warm

houses in Philadelphia, while the Americans froze in their log huts in the surrounding valley. A letter written by Brigadier General James Mitchell Varnum to General George Washington in mid-December of 1777 stated the obvious:

*"Three Days fuccefsively we have been deftitute of Bread. Two Days we have been intirely without Meat. It is not to be had from the Commif-saries. Whenever we procure Beef, it is of fuch a vile Quality, as to render it a poor Succerdernium for Food. The men muft be fupplied, or they cannot be commanded...The Complaints are too urgent to pafs unnoticed."*

Without the luxury of refrigeration, many foods perished before the men could eat them. Quite often, the food was spoiled to the point that the men got sick on it; dysentery was a common complaint brought on by eating rotten food or tainted water. Over and over again, General Washington, in his General Orders to the troops, exhorted them to be mindful to handle their food provisions in a way to keep them as clean and fresh as possible.

Some of the foods that were common and plentiful, and therefore regularly obtained and eaten by the army included the meats: corned beef, pork and fish, and vegetables such as: potatoes, peas, beans and turnips. Wild plants such as: watercress and lamb's quarter were part of the soldier's diet because they could be found in the fields and along streams.

The men in the companies were often divided into groups of six to eight; each group being referred to as a "mess". Within each mess, one man, who was the most adept at cooking, might be chosen by his "mess mates" to be the cook. Or, each man might take a turn at cooking. Each mess unit was issued an iron kettle, and any type of dish that could be made in a kettle was

common. The most common types of dishes to be made in kettles were soups or stews, but meat would also be boiled in the kettles. It was generally believed that frying, baking or broiling meat was unhealthy. Spits were sometimes fashioned so that meats could be suspended over the fire and roasted.

Certain foods, such as bread, which the inexperienced mess cooks had difficulty in preparing, were either made by a 'company' baker and distributed throughout the company, or they would be purchased from civilians. The mess cook would, in the absence of true bread, prepare firecakes. These were simply made from a handful of flour and enough water to make a solid paste. The paste would be fashioned into thin discs that would be placed in upright positions around the fire. When the side exposed to the fire turned black, the cake would be turned with its other side toward the fire. When the second side was blackened, the firecake would be ready to be eaten. Despite its exterior appearance, the inside of the firecake often remained moist and pasty. General Washington, in his General Orders for 05 July, 1777 stated that:

*"The General recommends temporary ovens to each brigade, which by men who underftand it, can be erected in a few hours. Bread baked in thefe, will be much wholefomer than the foddens cakes which are but too commonly ufed."*

General Washington encouraged his men to obtain and eat vegetables when possible. Being a gentleman farmer in his private life, it is little

wonder that he would attempt to encourage his troops to eat more vegetables. In his General Orders of 09 June and 05 July, 1777, he stated:

*"As nothing can be more comfortable and wholefome to the army than vegetables, every encouragement is to be given to the Country people, to bring them in; The least infult, or abuse to any of them coming to, or returning from market will be feverely punifhed."*

*"As there is a plenty of common and French forrel; lamb's quarters, and water crefses, growing about camp; and as thefe vegetables are very conducive to health, and tend to prevent fcurvy and all putrid diforders - The General recommends to the foldiers the conftant ufe of them, as they make an agreeable fallad, and have the moft falutary effect. The regimental officer of the day to fend to gather them every morning, and have them distributed among the men."*

The use of the word *victuals* for the title of this essay might have seemed a little flippant, but it was used for a specific reason. The word *victuals* (pronounced 'vit-\*ls) means: food supplies or provisions, and was in common use during

the period of the American Revolutionary War. Since this essay was devoted to a study of the food provisions of our 18th Century Patriot ancestors, the use of the word, *victuals*, seemed entirely appropriate.

## Second Quarterly Meeting

The Second Quarterly Meeting of the Blair County Chapter, SAR will be held on 09 June, 2001 at the Kings Family Restaurant in Altoona, starting at noon. If you've come to a meeting in the past, please consider joining us again. If you've never come to a meeting before, please feel welcome.

### Excerpts from The Hampshire Chronicle, Vol. III, Numb.131, Monday, February 20 1775

*"Laft night there was a numerous meeting of feamen at a public houfe near Rotherhithe, when the brave tars came to a refolution not to ferve on board any fhip deftined for America; and at the fame time declared, that if prefs warrants fhould be ifsued out, fooner than be forced, like flaves, to fight againft the Americans, they would die on the fpot."*

*"This day (Feb. 13) there was a meeting of a number of the inhabitants at the Guidhall for the purpofe of petitioning the Houfe of Commons to enforce the American acts, in imitation of that prefented from Birmingham... We are confidently afured that the feamen belonging to the fhips in the River are fecreting themfelves for fear of an impreff being ifsued to man the fhips going to America."*